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COVID-19 AND OTHER PANDEMICS

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EDITORIAL

THOSE INSIDE AND THOSE OUTSIDE

The global coronavirus pandemic has taken the world by surprise and has caused uneven reactions in different countries. Some had more time to react as it arrived later to their territory, but in any case, little was known about the virus. Cuba seems to be doing relatively well in controlling the virus and the number of people infected, but not in the consequences. The absence of visitors joins an inefficient production, a precarious distribution system and a lack of incentives and resources to improve the production of something as basic as food. To make things worse, the latest US sanctions have even put the large influx of remittances in check. The country is much more dependent of the outside world than it would like to acknowledge. We should not forget that the virus is only the first of the obstacles; the looming economic crisis and the readjustment of the world's order are also invited to the meeting.

Despite the island's current difficulties, it is possible that in the long run this will result in greater openness, productive reorganization and the elimination of counter-productive elements such as the stockpile system. Perhaps reducing investment, in the more than sufficient hotel offer, and using the resources to improve production will be considered. This will depend on whether the institutions are able to see the opportunities offered by times of crisis. What is clear is that it will take a long time before the flow of tourists returns to the previous levels, particularly since long before the pandemic the flow of visitors was already decreasing.

This bulletin focuses on people, on Cubans inside and outside the island. The experience of ordinary Cubans has depended a lot on their personal circumstances,



although the whole population has suffered from new restrictions on mobility that try to stop contagion. Those who yesterday lived better than the majority due to their direct contact with tourists, have seen their income reduced to zero. Those who received remittances from abroad, have perhaps been the best able to cope with the crisis and the increase in prices. The hard-working guajiro has continued his life without major changes, as animals and the countryside are demanding companions. However, in the end, some more and some less, they have all suffered from shortages, long queues, lack of hygiene items and blackouts, which have increased in recent months. For activists and independent journalists the experience is not a pleasant one. Decree-Law 370 is being used to fine those who report on issues that make the government uncomfortable. Meanwhile, the rest of the world is too busy with its own problems to worry now about what is happening on the island.

For people living abroad, the experience has been as varied as the countries and circumstances in which they find themselves. We have heard dramatic stories of people stranded in Russia, of those who have lost loved ones despite being in more fortunate countries or of those who have been left without work in a strangeland. On the other side, we have also heard others, albeit very minority ones, from some for whom the pandemic has brought some luck. In this bulletin, we bring a bittersweet mix of experiences. What is indisputable is that this pandemic has not left anyone indifferent, not even those who have tried to act as if the virus did not exist.

Juan Torres

CUBANS, VICTIMS OF CORONAVIRUS IN THE BORDERS

MARLON MARTORELL

Marlon Martorell and his wife Kenia traveled from Cuba to Central America looking to meet with their family in the United States. They had to flee due to the constant harassment from the State's authorities as a consequence of their work as political opponents and human rights defenders. Currently, they are in the US-Mexico border, waiting for the situation to improve.

Being outside my country, Cuba, far from my family and friends, I am one of the coronavirus victims in Mexico. I am at the mercy of a ruthless health care system, as is the Mexican health system. If you do not have health insurance, you do not get medical care and they leave you outside the hospital, as it happened to me. I was completely dehydrated as a consequence of the diarrhoea and the inanition of more than 10 days virtually without eating, but they denied testing me for the COVID-19. According to them, they did not have enough tests, so they sent people to private places where they charge you up to \$1.500 Mexican pesos (59€) for the test. I feel that I survived thanks to our Lord almighty, the conditions, under which I passed the virus and under which I am still not cured, were inhuman.

I believe in Cuba a good work has been done at fighting the COVID-19 in terms of hospitals and similar departments. In contrast, the police officers are beating, fining and sometimes imprisoning people for not wearing a mask. However, they concentrate crowds in endless queues of hundreds of persons to sell soaps, small packages of chicken or one litre of sunflower oil per person.

My wife and I get out of Cuba running away. For years, we were victims of the Cuban political police. We were afraid that at the end, after going through so many things (including attacks against my life), I was going to be imprisoned. We wanted to go across Mexico seeking to apply for asylum in the United States where we can be safe next to my daughter, who is a US citizen, and my grandson, in

addition to a brother, who also is a citizen, and two nephews, refugees there and all of them fighters for Cuba's freedom. Finding myself 50 years old in Mexico, far from any relative's help while being sick of COVID-19 and suffering hypertension, with no money and with no work, as I was fired from the Soriana store I worked, due to my illness, all the process has been really tough.

My wife and I are in Mexico completely helpless, at the mercy of crime and other unscrupulous people who engage in kidnapping and drug trafficking. Additionally, the borders closure between both countries has paralyzed our asylum process.

As a result of this, along with the risks that arise from being a political activist against the Cuban dictatorship, I am urged to be provided with political asylum in the United States and finally meet with the part of my family that lives there. Everything is getting harder; we do not even have a lawyer or legal advice of any type.

The situation of other Cubans in the borders is similarly hard, the lack of work, the latent danger of being victim of drug traffickers or kidnappers, in addition to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Cuban, not having work, neither has health insurance, and does not have money, nor can pay a private clinic remaining completely helpless since people are dying in front of public hospitals.

WHAT DO THE NEXT FEW MONTHS HAVE IN STORE FOR US?

SIMONNE MARTEY

Simonne walked around Havana to ask about the situation of several local women and of people working on tourism-related activities. She brings us their testimonies.

“The border closure and the immediate drop of tourism has been a disaster for our pockets, fortunately, I asked for the temporary suspension of the license” – told me Odalis, who is landlady of two apartments for renting to foreign people only –. According to her, she is using the food reserve that she had for the rental and also is affecting her bank account, since she

has no other income.

Her mother, who had a stress crisis, kicked Alicia and her 8-months-old baby out of the house. She also destroyed Alicia’s phone and threw all her things out on the street. Now Alicia lives in a temporary rental. She does not know yet how she is going to pay as her husband became unemployed as a consequence of the pandemic.

Carmen’s case has shocked me. Her mother underwent brain tumour surgery and amidst the crisis she cannot get soap, diapers or medicines. Even getting an oxygen cylinder has been impossible.

The supply was already affected before the COVID-19, but this phenomenon came to increase the lack of food and hygiene products in general. “I rent to foreigners, now I am selling rum and cigarettes to survive. My daughter used to work in a cafeteria and she still has contact that provide me the products to sell” – tells me Laura with a bit of resignation.

Juan rides a rickshaw, he is starting to feel the lack of pedalling and profit. He tells that, despite not being the owner of the rickshaw, every day he had a little money to buy food and cigarettes. Currently he goes from block to block collecting bottles to sell them to the small private industries that still operate.

Lucia says that sometimes she wants to run away. Both of her parents have Alzheimer’s and she has to balance her emotions and needs. “Sometimes I want to die” – tells crying.



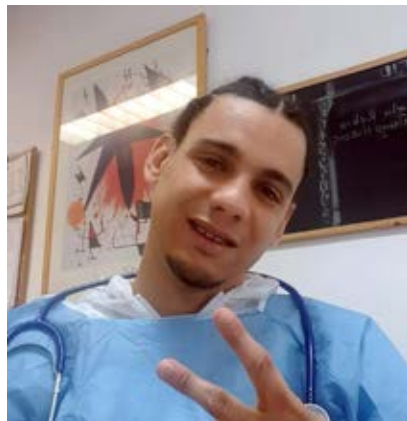
Some days we do not have electricity in all day. By contrast other times electricity is cut during the dawn when the heat is unbearable and the mosquitoes feast on us. There are communities where water is a luxury, at times you have to go out and carry it. Almost always the women are the ones who carry the water, meanwhile the man waits on the couch for the precious liquid to bathe.

The families that receive remittances, food and phone recharges from abroad, are the ones who are able to handle better these moments of paralysis. The others, the ordinary Cubans, do not know how long we can resist. There are many and diverse examples of the terrible situation that the Cuban people live today: houses in bad condition on the verge of collapse, overpopulation of households generating conflicts among the family members, long queues to get food and toiletries, hyperinflationary commodity prices... The question that spins in the air is: What do the next few months have in store for us?

SAVING LIVES



Nelson Gandulla



He is a young Cuban doctor and LGTBIQ activist from the city of Cienfuegos.

In 2016, he emigrated to Spain, where he still resides in the city of Madrid. There he lives with his partner and (since recently) finally practices medicine.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought hard times for the entire world population. So it has been for the migrants living in Spain, who have had to face a new unknown challenge and readapt to the new reality, changing lifestyles, customs, and in some cases directly starting over from scratch.

For me, these have been moments of great fear and uncertainty, and above all, of longing, nostalgia for not being able to be close to the people I love at such a sad and tense time. This situation has often made me think of my people in Cuba, and reflect on the need for those of us, who are still alive, to push forward more than ever the struggle so if something like this happens again, there will not be so many families separated. It made me need even harder a future for Cubans, where living in freedom does not require us to go abroad and stop seeing your loved ones for so long, such as in these extreme circumstances

we have been experiencing. To think that you cannot help someone you love, and even that they may die while you are so far away, is very hard.

Halfway through the pandemic I was unemployed, and that was the hardest time, because I depend on my work for my survival here. However, the COVID-19 also brought something very positive and satisfying that has been a turning point for my professional career here in Spain. I studied medicine in Cuba, and since I arrived, I applied for the homologation of my degree, a very long and complicated process. Nevertheless, the health emergency produced the need for more medical professionals, and finally my degree was validated. For me, it is incredible to be able to exercise my vocation to help the country that has taken me in and where I am building my future. I cannot think of a better way to thank than by doing the best thing I know how to do: saving lives.

WOMEN, MORE VULNERABLE IN SOCIAL ISOLATION



Zuleidys Pérez

Zuleidys is located in the east of Cuba and carries out independent initiatives to support and empower women in her community.

A large part of the world is facing the fatal COVID-19 pandemic, which is leaving a large number of deaths. Trying to reduce the transmission of this virus, different types of governments have adopted different measures.

The Cuban government is no exception and has also taken measures, one of the main ones being social isolation. However, these measures have caused several problems within the population, especially for women, who are the fundamental axis of many families. It should be kept in mind that Cuban women continue to



assume culturally assigned gender roles, which still keep them slaves of men and their power.

Living conditions in Cuba have led to bigger families, with 12 to 14 people, children, parents, siblings, sisters-in-law, nephews, grandparents, etc., living together in the same house. The woman, in her domestic environment, in her daily effort to articulate the family, is the one who is mostly affected by these measures. Hygiene in the home, the care and education of children and the elderly, the whole weight of work and care falls on them. In addition, the poor housing conditions, the lack of food, of basic necessities such as soap, detergent, toothpaste and problems of access to drinking water must also be added. Such kinds of problems are the ones that Cubans face on a daily basis.

Social isolation exposes women even more to the increase of machismo and domestic violence, which leads to murders of women, men staying home longer, alcoholism, gambling and drugs, all of which affects the coexistence. Women live in a situation of constant violation of their fundamental rights. The State, in its ego of being within the countries with fewer cases of COVID-19 infections, ignores these problems. Until there is a transparent and participatory government in Cuba, with democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and, above all, until there are public policies that provide protection for women, we will continue to be the most vulnerable sector of the population, and even more in times of quarantine.

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